

Ataxia Caused by Alcohol



Ataxia means lack of coordination, and is the result of damage to a part of the brain called the cerebellum which is responsible for coordinating movement. Common signs of ataxia are unsteadiness, clumsiness, and slurred speech. Ataxia is a symptom of many different disorders and can be transient or permanent.

Most people know from experience or from watching others that drinking alcohol affects balance and coordination, and alcohol intoxication causes people who are not normally affected by ataxia to look like they have developed all the classic signs (ie a wide-footed, unsteady gait, slurred speech, clumsiness of their hands, movement, and double vision). After the acute phase of intoxication all the symptoms are resolved.

Prolonged heavy drinking can cause damage to the brain resulting in permanent ataxia and other problems, such as memory loss and confusion. Alcohol-related dementia is known as Korsakoff's syndrome.

Cerebellar ataxia as the result of alcohol seems to most often affect the legs, with patients saying they have weak or 'slow' legs, and walking with a staggering gait. Another manifestation of alcohol abuse is the damage to the peripheral nerves (peripheral neuropathy), especially involving the feet and legs, with altered sensation of these parts of the body. This peripheral neuropathy, when associated to the cerebellar ataxia, makes the unsteadiness and walking worse.

Damage from alcohol is probably the most common cause of chronic cerebellar ataxia and around a third of alcoholics are affected. The damage may occur due to a combination of malnutrition and the direct toxic effects of alcohol. Some individuals seem to be more susceptible than others to these toxic effects so there is no precise definition of how much alcohol is required or how long someone needs to drink heavily for before damage occurs. Once damage has occurred, the symptoms continue to progress as long as excessive drinking is continued. If drinking stops, the symptoms stabilise and occasionally may improve slightly with continued abstinence along with a healthy diet and nutritional supplements as necessary.

The first step in treatment is stopping drinking. Ataxia UK can help people cope with living with ataxia but there are other organisations which can provide specific information and support for alcohol-related problems. If you are worried about your drinking or want help stopping you should call Drinkline on 0800 917 8282.

Useful resources:

The Alzheimers Society Scotland has information sheets on alcohol-related brain damage and provide various support services for people with dementia.

Alzheimer Scotland
22 Drumsheugh Gardens
Edinburgh
EH37RN
Phone: 01312431453
Email: alzheimers@alzscot.org

Freephone 24hr helpline: **0808 808 3000**

Website: www.alzscot.org

Ataxia UK, Lincoln House, Kennington Park, 1-3 Brixton Road, London SW9 6DE
www.ataxia.org.uk helpline@ataxia.org.uk
Tel: 020 7582 1444 Helpline: 0845 644 0606

Alcohol Concern works to improve services for people with alcohol-related health problems and has an extensive directory of local alcohol services including treatment and rehabilitation centres.

Alcohol Concern
64 Leman Street
London
E1 8EU

Tel: **020 7264 0510**

Fax: **020 7488 9213**

E-mail: contact@alcoholconcern.org.uk

Website: www.alcoholconcern.org.uk

Drinkline is a confidential service offering information and support to people who are worried about their drinking or families and friends who are worried about other peoples drinking. Helpline: **0800 9178282**

Drinkline offers the following services:

- Information and self-help materials
- Help to callers worried about their own drinking
- Support to the family and friends of people who are drinking
- Advice to callers on where to go for help

This information leaflet was written by Ataxia UK in collaboration with Dr Paola Giunti, the Consultant Neurologist at the Ataxia UK Accredited Ataxia Centre of Excellence at the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, London.

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